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MEMORIES OF THE SMITHSONIAN

BY DR. MARCUS BENJAMIN
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IN Simon Newcomb's "Reminiscences of an Astronomer" he tells of how he visited Washington in 1854 and then "speculated upon the possible object of a queer red sandstone building, which seemed so different from anything else, and heard for the first time of the Smithsonian Institution."

It was not long before Newcomb visited Secretary Henry, who received him "with characteristic urbanity, told me something of his own studies, and suggested that I might find something to do on the Coast Survey." This was the beginning of Newcomb's entrance into the "world of sweetness and light" that culminated in a career and reputation never surpassed by any American man of science.

Thus almost from the completion of the home of this famous institution it began its work "for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men" which is given in the will of its founder as its particular mission.

The Smithsonian Institution came into existence by the Act passed by Congress and approved by President Polk on August 10, 1846. A building was soon considered necessary and in response to an invitation James Renwick, Jr., of New York City, submitted two designs, one of which in the style of architecture of the last half of the twelfth century, known as the Norman or Lombard was selected.

A site was chosen on the Mall to the west of Seventh Street and about where Tenth Sreet would cross the Park and on May 1, 1847, the corner stone of the new building was laid with imposing ceremonies, including Masonic rites.

The design originally consisted of a main center building two stories high and two wings of a single story connected by intervening ranges, each of the latter having on the north or principal front a cloister with open stone screen. Later the east wing was entirely rebuilt and the connecting range is now four stories high, so that the cloister has disappeared. On the west side the connecting range has been included so as to form part of the structure.

The building, as originally designed, contained provision for objects of natural history, thus at the beginning providing for a museum; archeological and mineralogical cabinet; a chemical laboratory and library; a gallery of art; and lecture rooms.

Two years later, in April, the east wing of the building was ready for occupancy by the Secretary and his staff, and before the end of the year the west wing was also completed and was being temporarily fitted for occupation as a library.

Let us now return to the man who was the inspiration of the Smithsonian. When Professor Henry came from Princeton to Washington he settled with his family in a pleasant house on the southeast corner of E and Thirteenth Streets, but later the east wing of the Smithsonian building became his permanent home. He was gladly accepted as the foremost among the Washington men of science, and it soon became the pleasant practise of visiting scientists to call and pay their respects to him whenever they were in Washington. Many of these were younger men who came to have a filial affection for him whom they so justly regarded as the Nestor of American science. Two experiences of this character have come to me from friends, both of whom have since been called to fill important places in the scientific world. I venture to include them.

Dr. William McMurtrie, one of the early chemists in the Department of Agriculture, often told me of the happy evenings spent in the Smithsonian, when he was on one side of the table and Professor Henry on the other, discussing papers on chemistry to be used for insertion in the appendix of the Annual Reports. McMurtrie's final years were made less sad by a portrait of Henry that I was able to send him, and when I last saw him he had it framed and hung on the walls of his library among the great men he had known and loved.

When filling the chair of chemistry at the U. S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Charles E. Munroe, now the senior dean of scientific studies in George Washington University, was always glad to spend a Sunday in Washington, so that he might enjoy the hospitality of the secretary and his family.

Doubtless there were many others; for when there are three young ladies in a family as well as a distinguished father, it becomes difficult to keep the young men away.

Then frequently there came to the Smithsonian Institution members of the Scientific Club, a unique organization that met every Saturday evening, except during the summer months, at the home of some one of its members, and which was essentially the parent of the now famous Cosmos Club of Washington. Among its members was Henry, of whom Hugh McCulloch wrote:

> Professor Henry was thoroughly American in his loyalty to the government; and in his admiration of our republican institutions, but in scientific pursuits he was a citizen of the world.

The other members included: Alexander Dallas Bache, a great-grandson of Benjamin Franklin and for many years superintendent of the Coast Survey; F. A. P. Barnard, then associated with the Coast Survey and later president of Columbia College in New York City; Benjamin N. Craig, of the Army Medical Museum; James M. Gilliss, an astronomer of reputation who had charge of the Naval Observatory; J. E. Hilgard, then in the service of the Coast Survey, and later its superintendent; General A. A. Humphreys, a famous topographical engineer and later chief of his corps; Jonathan H. Lane, a wonderful mathematician, who lived a life of great usefulness to others but without achieving special distinction; Hugh McCulloch, comptroller of currency, and the secretary of the treasury during Lincoln's administration; General Montgomery C. Meigs, who possessed "vigilance, industry and integrity, with the ability to comprehend large transactions, and master the smallest details" which he demonstrated to a remarkable degree while in charge of the Quartermaster's department during the Civil War; Peter Parker, best known for his knowledge of the Chinese language and for his services to the government in aiding in the establishment of diplomatic relations with China; Titian H. Peale, an artist of recognized ability but associated with the work of the patent office; George C. Schaeffer, "a prodigy of learning" and long librarian of the patent office; and William B. Taylor, the editor of the Smithsonian publications and bibliographer of Henry. McCulloch says of them:

> There was not one who would not have been distinguished in any literary and scientific club in this country, or any other; there was not a money-worshipper or a time-server among them all.

In 1863 the National Academy of Sciences came into existence and its annual meetings have always been held in Washington during April. Bache was its first president and Henry was his successor. Among those named as members in the act of incorporation were Gilliss, Hilgard, Humphreys, Lane and Meigs who were connected with the Scientific Club. The meeting place of the academy was usually in the Smithsonian building, but no meeting was ever complete without the formal reception given by Secretary Henry. And what a splendid galaxy of men these were! There was the gracious and interested Agassiz, the kindly Gray, and the erudite Peirce from Harvard; the two Sillimans, father and son, and Dana, the geologist from Yale; nor should I omit Wolcott Gibbs, the great chemist, an alumnus of Columbia; nor Torrey, the botanist, nor the delightful Newberry, the paleontologist. These and many others graced with their charming personalities these social gatherings in the east wing of the Smithsonian.

The east wing of the Smithsonian Building was assigned to Secretary Henry "and his staff" as a dwelling place, but at that early date the "staff" does not appear to have been very large.

In 1847 Charles C. Jewitt was appointed assistant secretary and librarian, and remained as such until 1855, when he was separated from the institution in consequence of a disagreement of policy with Henry in regard to administration. His retirement has been referred to as representing "the culmination of a struggle between science and literature in which science prevailed."

Spencer Fullerton Baird came to the institution as assistant secretary in 1850 and continued in that capacity until 1878, when, on the death of Henry, he succeeded to the secretaryship, which he then held until his own death in 1887. Baird resided for a time on the corner of B and 10th Streets, south of the institution, but later had his home on the north side of Massachusetts Avenue, between 14th and 15th Streets. He does not appear to have ever lived in the Smithsonian itself, although his offices were for many years over the entrance of the north front of the main building.

Baird will always be remembered on account of his remarkable influence upon young naturalists. John S. Billings, the veteran librarian, said:

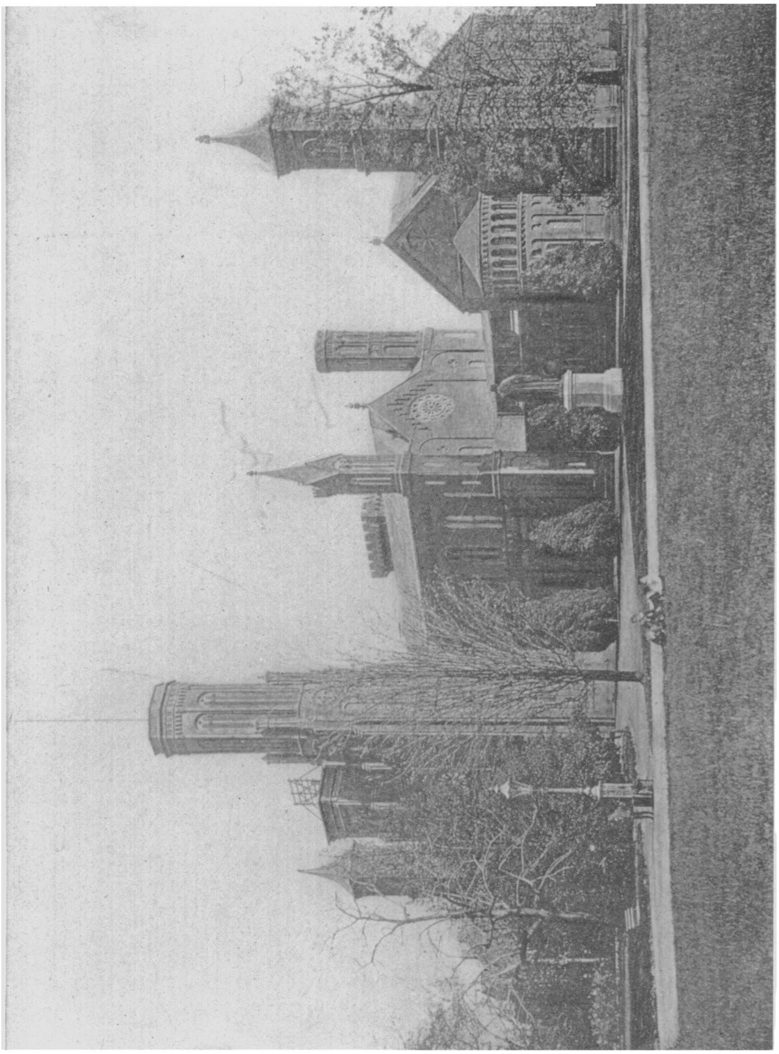
> Such work as was done by Professor Baird in this direction gives a starting point to many observers and investigators in different localities, stimulates further inquiry, and when done on the extensive scale on which he did it, based on the examination and comparison of a large number of specimens from widely different localities, exercises a powerful influence for years to come in lines of exploration, collection and critical research.

Doctor Billings was indeed right; for the influence of Baird is ever with us, and it is seldom that any important volume on natural history is issued by the Smithsonian or the National Museum without reference to this fact. Let me quote in part Robert Ridgway's dedication to Baird which appears in the first volume of his monumental "Birds of North and Middle America," the sixth part of which has just been published.

> Dedicated to the memory of Spencer Fullerton Baird, America's first and best systematic ornithologist, whose guiding principle ''What is worth doing is worth doing well'' is evident through all his work; who labored for the advancement of science, not for fame.

Mention must be made, even if brief, of William J. Rhees, who was chief clerk during the administration of Henry, Baird and Langley. Yielding, however, to advancing years during the incumbency of the last-named, he became archivist and occupied his closing years in the preparation and publication of the two volumes entitled "Documents Relative to the Origin and History of the Smithsonian Institution." He came to the Institution in 1852 and died in its service fifty-five years later. He was long the senior of us all, and to his wonderful memory I am indebted for many of the reminiscences of the institution that are here given. It is much to be regretted that no time was ever found to place on record those memories which were lost forever when he yielded to that summons from which there is no recall. His deep devotion to the institution he loved so well was evidenced by a bequest from his modest estate.

About the middle of the last century there were two great masters who in this country exerted a tremendous influence upon young men,



The Smithsonian Institution.

leading them to the study of natural science. These were Agassiz and Baird. The influence of Agassiz survives in that wonderful assemblage of pupils that included not only his own son Alexander, but also Alphaeus Hyatt, David Starr Jordan, E. S. Morse, A. S. Packard, F. W. Putnam, S H. Scudder, A. E. Verrill and many others. Baird's influence was equally potent and many of his students came to the institution and for a time occupied the tower-rooms of the main building so that they might be always near him to profit by his instruction.

JOSEPH HENRY.

The names of many of these young naturalists who came to the Smithsonian have been forgotten, but fortunately some of them may be recalled by the following stanza, improvised by one of their number, after a hotly contested argument on some disputed point in natural history:

Into this well of learning dip with spoon of Wood or Horn
For students Meek and holy silver spoons should treat with scorn.
If Gabb should have the gift of Gill
As Gill has gift of Gabb,
'Twould show a want of judgment still
To try to Cope with Meek.

Egleston, the mineralogist; Dall, the conchologist; and Ridgway, the ornithologist, may also be included among those who for a time were tenants of the tower-rooms.

Cope, Dall, Gabb, Gill and Meek became members of the National Academy, which is distinct evidence of the high esteem with which their investigations were regarded by their contemporaries.

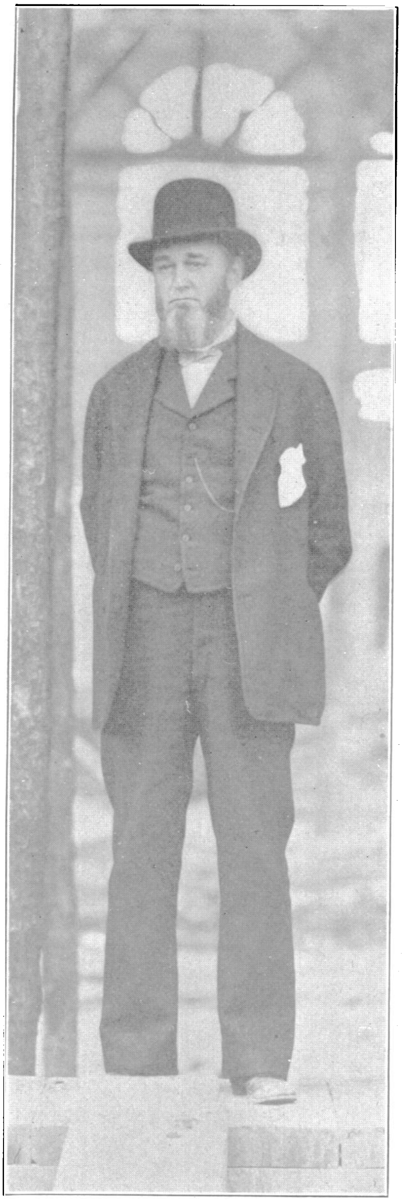
Somewhere in his "Life of Lincoln" John Hay tells an amusing story of the tower-dwellers which is not denied by Gill, who was long the only survivor of the war-period.

It appears that one evening when Secretary Henry was busily engaged at the White House with President Lincoln discussing in all probability the scientific features of some one of the many inventions that were submitted to the government authorities either for the improvement of war conditions or for increasing their severity, a visitor appeared who somewhat excitedly insisted on seeing the president at once. He was ushered into the room, and on expressing his desire for a private interview, was assured by Mr. Lincoln that his guest was a loyal Union man. The trouble was soon disclosed; for the stranger broke out into a violent harangue on the treasonable proceedings that had been going on at the Smithsonian Institution. The President promptly replied: "We will have to look into this, and it is fortunate that Professor Henry is here with us to hear your story."

It appeared that every night at a given hour lights appeared in one of the rooms of the South Tower and the shifting of these lights was interpreted as signals by means of which the traitor in the Smithsonian was conveying information to the enemy whose representatives were stationed on the hills in Virginia opposite Washington. The matter was however promptly investigated by Secretary Henry, who was soon able to report that the phenomena of lights was due to the early return of Professor Gill to his room where every evening he devoted his time to the study of the specimens that were assigned to him to report upon.

Gill was the last of the "old guard" and notwithstanding his advancing years he came almost daily to the old building where he gladly gave of his time and knowledge to those who were in search of truth.

His visit to Scotland in 1906 was a great event in his life and he



SPENCER F. BAIRD.

represented some scientific body at the four-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the University of Aberdeen. One Sunday morning when about to enter the local church he was stopped by one of the deacons and asked the strange question: "Are you a Christian?" Not quite prepared for such an interrogation, and perhaps not hearing the words clearly, but realizing that an answer was necessary, he promptly said: "No, I am an American." To which came the response: "Oh, very well, you may go in."

No respectable building of any antiquity, I suppose, can exist without sooner or later having its ghost story. The Smithsonian is no exception to the rule, and for a time tales were in circulation of the white figure that was seen moving rapidly about the halls. Finally, the servants in the secretary's family reported having seen the "ghost" on several occasions at dawn. The matter was soon cleared up; for it was found that a distinguished English scientist who was studying one of the collections was in the habit after taking his cold "tub" of enveloping himself in a sheet and running about in that scanty attire on cold mornings to restore his circulation, a practise which it is almost needless to say he promptly discontinued when his attention was called to the unfortunate notoriety that he was giving to the building.

Doubtless because of the skeletons and bones of strange animals that claimed the attention of some of the scientists who reported on the specimens that came to the Smithsonian from the early trans-continental surveys the institution came to be regarded as haunted. This was especially true in the case with the colored people, whose superstitious natures made them so fearful of the innocent building that they could not be induced to pass the door after sundown.

It is said that on one occasion a colored man who was seeking employment was hired by an official of the Smithsonian and on being told to report to the institution, became so frightened that he ran away and could not be found for two weeks.

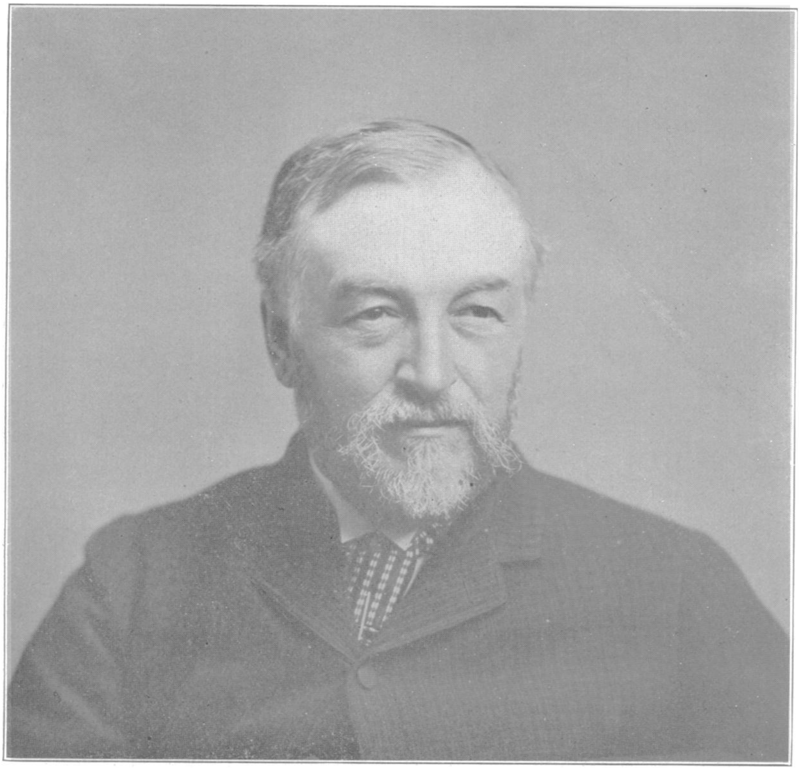
The main portion of the Smithsonian building was two stories high, each of which contained a large hall. The one on the lower story was not occupied at first, but it was here that as early as 1856 there was on daily exhibition a large map showing the condition of the weather over a considerable portion of the United States. Every morning reports were received by telegraph, telling of the changes that had occurred and these were then indicated on the map by pieces of card-board of different colors serving to denote different conditions of the weather as to clearness, cloudiness, rain or snow. It is interesting to add that Professor Henry said:

> This map is not only of interest to visitors in exhibiting the kind of weather which their friends are experiencing, but is also of importance in determining at a glance the probable changes which may soon be expected.

Thus it was that the Smithsonian Institution was the first in the world to organize a comprehensive system of telegraphic meteorology and gave to the world as Cleveland Abbe describes it "that most beneficent natural application of modern science, the storm warnings." It was indeed the beginning of the Weather Bureau service.

The civil war interrupted the continuance of this service and the hall was assigned to the exhibition

THEO. GILL.



SAMUEL P. LANGLEY.

of museum specimens, principally the bird collections. With the removal of these to the newer building of the National Museum, part of the ever-growing library has been installed there.

On the upper floor was the large lecture room, capable of holding two thousand persons and there every winter courses of popular scientific lectures were delivered by masters in their specialties. To them the public of Washington was cordially invited and gladly came. It was at one of these, presided over by the venerable George Washington Parke Custis, that Otis T. Mason received his first inspiration to devote his attention to American anthropology, on which subject he afterwards became a recognized authority, and at the time of his death in 1908 was head curator of anthropology in the National Museum. This hall was given up later to the exhibition of the collections in prehistoric archeology and now contains the enormous collection of plants that constitutes the National Herbarium.

The west wing of the Smithsonian has often been called the chapel, owing perhaps to the square tower and apse that are on the north side. It was originally used as a library, but the increasing volume of books

Charles D. Walcott.

that poured in soon made other arrangements necessary. For a time the collections of marine invertebrates were installed there, but since these collections were transferred to the larger building it has not been permanently occupied.

From the fact that Greenough's statue of Washington that so long stood exposed to the elements on the east front of the capitol has found a resting place in this wing its use as a gallery for sculpture has been suggested.

During the summer before last it served a sacred purpose and so was consecrated anew by loving and competent hands to the restoration of the original Star-spangled Banner that floated over Fort McHenry just a century ago, and inspired the immortal words of Francis Scott Key.

After the death of Henry the offices of administration were grouped in the east wing and business became the dominant feature of that end of the building. Thereafter functions were usually given in the larger buildings of the National Museum. It is, however, of interest to remember that the workshops in which Secretary Langley constructed the machinery for the aerodrome with which he showed the practicability of aerial navigation were on the upper floor. That the trial of his machine was not altogether a success broke the heart of Langley, and he never was the same after that unfortunate experience.

John A. Brashear, a life-long friend, tells the following pathetic account of his last visit to Langley. He says:

> I can not forget the last half-hour I spent in his office in the Smithsonian Institution, where I had so many pleasant talks with him in past years. He showed me the little piece of apparatus that had broken, deflecting the aerodrome into the Potomac, whereas it should have sailed up into the air. With a sad heart he turned to me and with trembling voice said, "Mr. Brashear, this has wrecked my hopes forever. My life work is a failure." I did all in my power to cheer and comfort him, but it was too late.

The world failed at first to appreciate the value of Langley's demonstration, and he died without realizing the enormous value of his great contribution to science. During the summer of 1914 Glenn H. Curtiss has demonstrated on Lake Keuka in New York with Langley's original machine its absolute power of flying, thus establishing beyond every possible dispute that Langley's aerodrome represented "a clear triumph for pure inductive science." He was the first to demonstrate that powerful machines heavier than the air itself could be built to navigate the air.

The present secretary, Charles D. Walcott, now occupies the rooms of Langley's workshop with his laboratory, and there he devotes the time that he can spare from his administrative duties to the study of the Cambrian fauna, finding feet for wandering trilobites and furnishing eyes to those curious brachiopods that swam in the seas of that prehistoric long ago.